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AUTHOR Wolf, Ken
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ABSTRACT

Comparative biography can be used as a means of enlivening the teaching of college level interdisciplinary world civilization courses. By providing (and writing) well-written "human interest" material drawn from biographical essays, instructors can illustrate problems or issues in human life by showing how major political or cultural figures solved them. When selecting or writing comparative biographies, three criteria should be aimed for: (1) interest--is the person intrinsically "interesting" or can the biography be made interesting to a general audience? (2) importance--did the person make an impact on history either by reflecting the values of society or by seeking to change those values or directions? and (3) issues--did the person deal with social, political, or intellectual issues that are still of interest to educated men and women? Specific pedagogical goals include leading students to a sense of historicity by comparing cross-cultural values, investigating ways in which historical figures have been judged by other historians, writing respectable popular history, and using respectable specialists as sources. Specific examples of such biographical comparisons include: "Zoroaster and Buddha: Explaining Evil," "Diogenes and Mahavira: Unconventional Men," and "Al-Ghazzali and Aquinas: Faith and Reason." A survey of teachers using biographical essays at Murray State University (Kentucky) indicated that both teachers and students found comparative biographies readable, enjoyable, and educationally interesting. (LH)

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# USE OF COMPARATIVE BIOGRAPHY IN THE TEACHING OF WORLD HISTORY

by
Ken Wolf

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"Use of Comparative Biography in the Teaching of World History"

It is a cliche of the most yawn-inspiring sort to say that a required world civilization course for college freshmen can be made interesting only if we talk about people. History is people, after all, and even great social and political forces take shape in our minds and in our historical records only through the actions of people. Even the most abstracted census record on a computer printout is compiled by and for the use of individuals, we are fond of declaiming, and such records only have value when put to use by people making very personal decisions.

Yes, we say all of these things, and more. Yet, when it comes time to teach or take such a course, what do we find? In the first place we find textbooks such as the one by William McNeill (A World History) or the one by L. S. Stavrianos (The World to 1500; The World Since 1500) which are fascinatingly schematic but which give--in the case of that by Stavrianos--the life of Buddha one paragraph or the career of the Emperor Constantine a scant two. The alternative to these texts are books such as Burns and Ralph's World Civilizations, which provides a fuller account of the lives of famous men and women but which awes today's students by its sheer bulk. The subject of world history is simply too vast to lend itself to the narrative approach favored by the traditional tellers of historical tales.

At Murray State University in the Fall of 1979, our task was further complicated by the need to teach an explicitly interdisciplinary course in World Civilization as part of our new core requirements in general education. This meant that our course would be taught by economists, anthropologists, and political scientists as well as by historians, and that our course would pay particular attention to environmental forces, political structures and traditions,

economic, and social developments as we traced the journey of humankind from the caves to the moon. While it is true that historians generally treat such dimensions of the human story in any event, the innovative, inter-departmental structure of our course made our syllabus very schematic, helped incline us to select the Stavrianos text with its clear emphasis on technology and socio-economic trends, and thus made our two-semester World Civilization sequence less "person-oriented" than it might have otherwise been.

At the suggestion of a friend who had just reviewed a biographical text in American history I began (in the Summer of 1981) the writing of a series of short biographical studies, most of them cross-cultural and comparative, for use by students in our "World Civilization to 1500" course. Each of these short studies of about 3000 words, drawn from both primary and secondary sources, highlights a problem in human life and thought by showing how major political or cultural figures--always near contemporaries--tried to solve it. The tentative title of this collection is "Personalities and Problems: Individuals and Social Forces in World Civilizations." My initial objective has been to prepare a book of essays that would enliven the teaching of world civilization by providing well-written "human interest" material while at the same time illustrating problems or issues that transcend the boundaries of particular civilizations. These issues include, but are not limited to, the role of religion as a social force, the influence of law as a force ~~both~~ shaping society, and the problems faced by female leaders in patriarchial societies. Although these are not "great men" studies in the traditional sense, one goal of the project has been to assess the ways in which individuals ~~both~~ create religious, social, and political change and the ways in which those same individuals are shaped by the forces at work in their societies and civilizations.

Of course, even the best effort to assess social and political change by focusing upon key individuals would fail (at least for freshmen) if the people

chosen were not INTERESTING. In selecting people for inclusion in my list, this became my first criteria: is this person intrinsically interesting or can this person be made interesting to a general audience through the organizational and literary "magic" of the writer's craft? Genghis Khan, for example, comes as close to being intrinsically interesting as anyone I've chosen. The magnitude of his achievement fascinates even the casual reader, and the legends that accompanied his sweep across Asia (some of the most colorful ones deliberately spread by his "advance men") make his story an exciting one. The uniqueness of his life and contribution to world history was such that, although I felt compelled to include him, I did not feel able to compare him adequately with another nomadic leader. The essay on Genghis Khan is one of two exceptions (the other is the essay on Hammurabi) to my use of the comparative principle.

The inclusion of an essay on Genghis Khan does, however, help illustrate a second criteria that I used in selecting personalities for this work. The people chosen had to be IMPORTANT. They had to have made an impact on history, either by reflecting the values of their society or by seeking to change those values or direction. In many cases, I believe I've discovered people who do both. The Chinese admiral Cheng Ho didn't change the direction of Chinese history in the fifteenth century, though his voyages offer a fascinating look at what might have been. His counterpart, Prince Henry of Portugal, both reflected the different attitudes of fifteenth-century Europeans toward overseas explorations and, by his work, helped to reinforce those attitudes and values. In his famous book on The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility (1943), philosopher Sidney Hook makes a distinction between the "eventful" man (who is important simply because he is there--e.g. the Dutch boy who stuck his finger in the dike) and the "event-making" man who displays "exceptional qualities of leadership" which actually change the direction of his civilization or country.

By Hook's standards, Abraham Lincoln was an "eventful" man while Lenin was an "event-making" hero.[1] Hook's distinction here, while a clear and interesting one, is inadequate; human actions and motives are (alas) often not as clear and distinct as the ideas we choose to form about them. It is difficult, for me at any rate, to decide the extent to which the Buddhist Emperor Asoka was "eventful" and the extent to which he was "event-making." It is not as difficult to decide that, in either case, he was important in illustrating the interaction between morality and politics.

My decision to compare Asoka with Shih Huang-ti is useful in introducing my third criteria for selection of world civilization personalities: did they deal with social, political, or intellectual ISSUES that are still of interest to educated men and women--and therefore to students of world civilizations, using the term "student" in the broadest possible sense. We still criticize rulers and statesmen when they do not adhere to our standards of moral rectitude, even while we secretly (and sometimes not so secretly) expect them to do whatever they feel necessary to get and keep power. The contrast between the ruthless First Emperor of China and his Indian Buddhist contemporary shows students that the issue of morality in government is neither a new one, nor one that is confined to one civilization. The fact that the harsher or less moral of the two rulers appeared to be the most successful shows students that this issue isn't an easy one to resolve either! Because of the source material available for personalities covered in the first several thousand years of most world history courses, as well as because of the general emphasis of most survey courses of this type, I focused largely on issues facing rulers. Only three of my first eleven essays deal with intellectuals or religious leaders.

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[1]Sidney Hook, The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 154-59.

These are: "Zoroaster and Buddha: Explaining Evil," "Diogenes and Mahavira: Unconventional Men," and "Al-Ghazzali and Aquinas: Faith and Reason." The issues raised in these three essays are, as the titles suggest, basic philosophical ones. My favorite among these is the one comparing Diogenes and Mahavira; it suggests a modification of our usual definition of "outsider" or of what it means to be unconventional. These men could only challenge their societies to the extent to which they were a part of those societies. More prophets than rebels, they asked their contemporaries to take the values of their day seriously; they were dangerously logical and consistent. Cross-cultural comparisons such as this one are one of the features of this project which make it unique. Such comparisons not only make the essays easier to organize and write, but they also help students, I believe, focus on the issue discussed in each essay. They make these studies more than mere personality profiles of the sort found, for example, in Lowell Thomas' Vital Spark: 101 Outstanding Lives (Doubleday, 1959).

Assuming that students in World Civilization courses are inspired by my criteria of selection based on Interest, Importance, and Issues, to actually read and think about these comparative biographies, what is their educational value? I will try to answer this question first, by discussing the specific pedagogical goals which I am pursuing in this project, and second, by describing what some of my colleagues teaching World Civilization at Murray State have done with these comparative studies.

After getting a student's attention with interesting subject matter and a well-written, brief analyzis of important questions, I try to capitalize on the few moments that I have with that person to lead him/her gently but deftly to a sense of historicity. How did this person understand himself or herself? What did Prince Henry think he was doing? How about Genghis Khan, or the "weird" ascetic Mahavira? Surely they didn't exist just for our amusement--

though years of watching pulp fiction and fictionalized history on television might have convinced our students that they did! The more remote my subjects are from today's students, in both time and temperament, the more important it is to try to help the reader see that the actions and values of historical figures did indeed make sense to them, and usually to many of their contemporaries. Mansa Musa of Mali may seem like a spendthrift to us; to his African subjects, and especially to himself, his pilgrimage to Mecca was an act of deep religious piety. Genghis Khan is a fascinating person to most of us precisely because the world of the nomads in which he lived was so different from our own. But by trying to understand the values of the "people who lived in felt tents," we might even begin to understand ourselves better. By considering why Genghis Khan didn't like cities, we might understand our own attraction/repulsion to them better.

But to understand the dramatic figures of the past requires more than an appreciation of what they were trying to accomplish--on its own terms as much as possible. We must also have at least some feeling for how these people were judged by others. One of the secondary themes of this project is an occasional look at how some of these men and women fared at the hands of historians. Negative judgment of the actions of the Byzantine Empress Irene (who had her son blinded) may have been exacerbated by the nineteenth-century male historians who wrote her history. The Chinese Emperor Shih Huang-ti was a Legalist and has long suffered what we might call today a "bad press" at the hands of Confucian historians. These historiographical tidbits are worthwhile if one's goal is to develop some appreciation of historical thinking; since they are small morsels, they are easy to swallow. At least, no one has yet complained that such minor philosophizing has ruined the story. Of course, one result of calling the historical judgments of others to our attention is that it might make us a bit more comfortable with our own judgments...and thus help eliminate the "false

idol" of objectivity that has hindered (rather than helped) the pursuit of historical truth.

My final pedagogical goal has been implied in much of what I've already said. It is, simply put, to write respectable popular history. By using respectable specialists as sources for both the factual and (much of) the interpretive material in these essays, I hope to show the general reader that scholarship is important and that the fruits of first-rate historical investigation can be presented in an interesting fashion. Perhaps this is the major significance of this project; it is a serious attempt to bridge the gaps between trade book and text book, and between biography and analysis. By focusing on so-called "great men" (and women), I am deliberately drawing attention to an issue that is still of great interest to the general public. By showing, in each essay, how the actions and goals of particular individuals were aided or retarded by environmental factors, I am appealing to the bias of most professional historians and social scientists. It is my fond hope that, by enticing members of both of these groups (and their followers) into reading this, I might be able to contribute to the much-needed dialogue between professional scholars and the famous "general reader." Of course, when attempting such bridge-building, there is always the danger that you will please neither group and fall, as bureaucrats are fond of saying, "between the cracks."

So far this hasn't happened. My colleagues at Murray State, in fact, have responded very positively to these comparative biographies. I secured some quick-copy money from the Dean of our college and from our local Teaching Center to "test-market" about 500 copies of the first five essays in the Fall of 1981. A survey of teachers and students at the end of that semester suggested hat students found them readable, enjoyable, and educationally interesting (they felt they learned something). Teachers found them helpful for class discussion,

and for providing aiternative reading to the Stavrianos text (the older edition of which many students found rather difficult to read). These essays do present some basic information not found in most textbooks. Initial response to the essays was great enough that this past Fall (1982) our campus bookstore manager agreed to print, staple, and offer for sale at cost (.85) copies of the full set of biographies--eight at that time. His run of 500 sets was sold out in several weeks, and he printed an additional 500 sets, at least 300 of which have been sold to World Civilization students. This coming Fall, I hope to repeat this printing (bookstore willing), offering for sale all ten of the comparative biographies covering the period to 1500. Some of my colleagues have told me that these studies help stimulate class discussions; others have given multiple choice test items or identifications covering material in the biographies; still others have found them useful as sources of information for inclusion in their own lectures. This last use was confirmed by an Associate Editor at Norton and Company, who did a broader marketing survey last year.

Naturally, some of the subjects as well as some of the issues discussed in these studies are more interesting than others, depending upon the person to whom you are talking. Some of these "great" figures in world history are heros by anyone's account; others are dreamers, critics, or misfits whose career may have extended the frontier of the possible, or whose life may be nearly forgotten in another 500 years. The focus remains on the fact that they are interesting people, grappling with important issues. History must be taught, our best teachers tell us, from the center to the periphery, from the student outward, from that which we know (or think we know, or want to know) to that which we don't know or understand. This is where we started: history is people--those who make it, those who interpret it, and (we hope) those who learn from it. I hope that these biographies will help today's students strengthen that link that connects the past to the present...and future.

Ken Wolf
History Department
Murray State University
Ky. 42071